

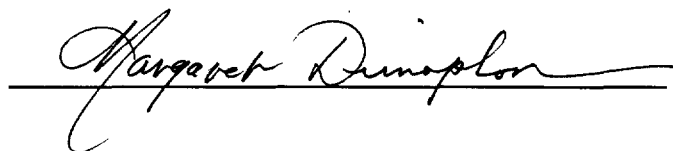
Early Works of a Fledgling Writer  
An Honors Creative Project (HONRS 499)

by

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A handwritten signature in cursive script, reading "Margaret Dimoplon", is written over a horizontal line.

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## Table of Contents

Abstract.....	1
Trapped.....	2
Untitled Work (rewrite of Trapped).....	11
Untitled Work.....	27
Awakening.....	43

## **Abstract**

I didn't really begin to write fiction until after I came to Ball State. I'd always had the desire to get my ideas onto paper, but my early attempts were less than successful, rapidly losing themselves in meaningless, superfluous details and a lack of focus on my part.

During the spring semester of the 1994-95 school year I took the Intro to Fiction Writing class, ENG 405. It was there that I learned a lot of the basics of the narrative art, that it has as much (if not more) to do with being a writer as opposed to merely the technique of writing. I learned a lot that semester, and it provided me with a base which I continued to develop through ENG 407 (the other fiction writing course offered by Ball State) and into the present day.

This creative project is a demonstration of how far I've come as a writer. It includes the first story I wrote for ENG 405, as well as a rewrite of that piece. Following those is another short story I originally submitted for 405, reworked for this project. The final piece is a short screenplay for a project that I worked on last semester.

Preceding the stories is commentary giving a little background about each individual work.

## Trapped

*Following are two versions of the first story I wrote for ENG 405. The original, "Trapped," is the first of the two and precedes the rewrite I did this semester.*

*When I first submitted this story before the class, the general consensus was that the combination of the title plus the first line of the story gave away too much of the plot. Also, there seemed to be a degree of character logic lacking within the piece - why does the main character stay when the obvious is beating him over the head?*

*And so, with those ideas in mind, I came back to "Trapped" and rewrote it, eliminating the title (for some reason I can't seem to hold onto those anymore) and working with the problem areas pointed out to me. Of course, there are other differences between the two, both in style and structure, and I like to think that these demonstrate how much my writing skills have grown.*

*Something to note: I still have yet to come up with a name for the drug mentioned in the rewrite. The drug is something of my own making, though I still have yet to find a name appropriate to the effects that it has on its users. It's not unlike the problems I have with titles.*

## Trapped

Something was wrong.

Tony could feel it with that same certainty he had when he was younger, that same feeling of dread he had whenever his old man was out late. Whenever the bastard came home drunk. A feeling honed by repeated beatings into something like a sixth sense. A sense that left a bad taste in his mouth. Bitter, like bile. The promise of violent potential energy. The feeling that somebody was going to get hurt. Bad.

His source of tension was easy to find. Too many things about this deal were wrong. This place for one thing. Tony looked around at the empty buildings surrounding him. Abandoned long ago, the windows above the hollow storefronts stared back at him with broken glass eyes extinguished long ago under a hail of rocks and bricks. Below, at ground level, former display windows had suffered the same fate, and now looked like large open mouths, their insides gutted long ago. The windows formed faces that appeared to be laughing. Or screaming. Like in some perverted funhouse. But there was nothing funny about being here. Especially at three in the morning.

A vacant part of town at a dead time of night equalled a simple enough equation in Tony's mind. It was the wrong place at the wrong time. What's worse, he thought, it's a dead end. He looked to where the buildings terminated in a long high chain link fence which spanned across the street from one row of shops to the next. It seemed like a recent addition, more recent than the buildings, although Tony was unsure what its purpose must have been, or if it even served that purpose very well. Through the wire

fence Tony saw lights of some building off in the distance. He found the thought of anybody living in this area to be rather puzzling.

Of course, where he grew up hadn't been much better. His part of town had suffered the draughts of drugs and crime which plagued most poverty stricken areas. Though not as bad as some other areas in the city, Tony had still considered it his own personal hell-hole, complete with an abusive alcoholic father to reign over it. That's what had driven him to get out, to push himself away from the trappings all around him, to graduate from high school, get the hell out of the house and take a shot at something better.

He'd seen that shot in taking some classes at a local tech school; the universities asked for amounts of money which he simply did not have. Even so, going to tech school was more expensive than he'd figured, and the problem of cash was one quickly realized.

The solution came in the deals. Small ones on the side, a little dope here, a bit of acid there, mostly minor stuff which nonetheless kept his bills paid and even occasionally put a little extra money in his wallet. The dangers of the deals were obvious. But Tony was cool. He had his sixth sense to keep him out of trouble.

*So why are you still here?* The thought surfaced, pushed itself to the forefront on his mind. Tony needed a distraction, something to keep his mind busy. He looked at the street, was met by the leering faces of the buildings, decided to keep moving his focus. He noticed Zack to his left, at the rear of the car with the others. Zack, who stood a little separate from the guys at the trunk, all the while watching them while wearing a badass

attitude like it naturally fit him. At the surface, Tony found his friend's bullshit gangsta routine a bit ridiculous. At a little over five feet tall, Zack was not exactly the epitome of intimidation. Nonetheless, it was what lay beneath the surface that disturbed Tony. Things like the submachine gun that Zack had hidden under his heavy leather jacket, or the other odd assortment of weapons he had stashed away on his body. This wasn't the same kid Tony had grown up with. Zack hadn't been as lucky as Tony. Unlike his long time friend, Zack hadn't done as well in school, unable to remain focused on his work and opting to be more of a slacker. It was ironic, Tony thought, how his friend's current image in fact contradicted his behavior in school.

Tony shifted uncomfortably, was suddenly aware of the heavy leaden object pressing into his stomach, reminded of its presence hidden under his heavy sweatshirt.

"A Glock 19," Zack had told him earlier that evening. "Steel slide, polymer handle. Holds fifteen rounds of nine-millimeter Parabellum in the clip, and one in the chamber. Reliable as all hell. There's no safety, so you have to be careful not to put a hole in your foot with these little bastards." He'd pushed a button on the side of the gun, releasing the clip out of the bottom of the gun's handle and holding the clip up so that Tony could see the top bullet. "CorBon one-fifteen grain plump jacketed hollowpoints. The closest legal thing to a cop bullet. Ninety-one percent one shot stops, which means if you hit a guy with one of these, he ain't getting back up." He put the clip back in the gun, racked the slide, and offered the loaded weapon to Tony.

"And how do you know this? From experience?" Tony asked his friend hesitantly.

"No, but I can *read*, man. Duh."

Tony reflected on the conversation, sighing. *Zack, if you had only used a part of that drive in other areas of your life, we probably wouldn't be here now*, Tony mused. His friend had been more than capable of applying himself in school; he'd proved it on more than one occasion with his avid pursuit of information of whichever topic interested him at the time. During their friendship, Tony had seen Zack go through a number of interests, and each time, Zack had become a sort of walking dictionary, possessing information that most people would never know. It just turned out that this most recent interest happened to have very serious, very deadly connotations. Tony felt this had more than a little to do with Zack's newfound badass image. His friend probably knew more things about his guns than most cops knew about theirs.

Tony looked over at Jimmie, who was doing all the talking right now. Jimmie, so damn cool, the one who had worked this deal out. Tony didn't know Jimmie all that well, had gone mostly on information that Zack had supplied him. *Which in truth, wasn't very smart*, he reminded himself. But Tony was here only at Zack's insistence, at his friend's assurance that this was going to be an easy deal, and at his friend's request for a backup man. This wasn't in the usual sense, Zack had explained. Instead, the logic here was that the more people that were at the deal, the less chance there was of anything going wrong.

Tony looked away from the group, leaning back against the car door. He didn't want to be near the others grouped around the open trunk. Too much nervous energy. He rubbed the back of his neck with his hand, could have sworn he felt the hairs standing on end. *Shit*, he thought. *What's wrong with me? I feel like a dog before a storm. I'm*



*gonna go apeshit and start running around here in a minute.*

There was almost a charge in the air, coming from the direction of the others. Tony snorted. He wouldn't have been surprised if the shit itself was giving off something. It probably glowed. It did all kinds of other funky ass things. It was hot, damn hot. Tony would just as well have left it alone. But Zack had said it was a sure thing, with big money involved. The stuff had great potential, would be easy to get rid of. Better yet, Jimmie had been able to arrange it so that they could do it all at once. Easy money.

Tony had heard around about the stuff, hadn't wanted anything to do with it. Having something that potent bothered him, damn near to the point that he just as well would have walked away from it. That's why he dealt small. It was less harmless, to himself and others. Walk away. Actually, the idea sounded better the more he thought about it.

*Just walk away from this whole fucking mess while I still can walk.*

Tony looked back at Jimmie. There was something not quite right about him. He looked....funny. What? Jimmie seemed to be overtly arrogant, more aggressive than he should be. Why? Was it a show for these guys, to try to prove that he wasn't some punk? No, there was something more. What was...? *No*, Tony realized. *Not that. Don't tell me that you've been sampling that shit. You stupid fuck.*

Tony turned to Zack, silently imploring his friend to make eye contact. Before he could do so, Jimmie intercepted him by shooting Tony what must have been his version of a reassuring smile. But there was more, a hidden "don't fuck this up" brimming just below the surface. Tony felt a flash of heat around his face and neck, as if Jimmie had read his mind. Tony looked away, breaking contact and acting cool as if nothing

happened. He focused on the asphalt at his feet, tried to keep his composure. *Christ*, he thought. *I'm not fuckin' cut out for this. God, all I want to do is just start walking away.*

He turned back to the fence at the end of the lane, and at the lights past them. Closer inspection revealed that the lights belonged to a convenience store a couple blocks away. *Yeah, that looks like as good a place as any*, he thought. *Definitely better than here. Hell, the place is still open; the lights are on. Must be one of those twenty-four hour joints. Cool. Think I'll have to check it out here pretty soon.*

*Why are you waiting?* The question echoed in his brain. *You said it yourself. Walk away while you still can.* Tony pondered the thought, looked over at the store, turned back to his friend. *Hell, he's too into this business. He wants this. He's your friend, but it's your ass.*

Tony turned back to the fence, started walking toward it. It was about fifteen feet high, with large enough gaps in the interwoven metal to get a decent foothold. Somebody climbing over would just have to take a little time getting over.

The sound of yelling jerked him back to the present. Commotion came from the trunk of the car. Jimmie was shouting something at the men and Zack while the men yelled something at him. Tony made little sense out of all the confusion at first. The men were running to where they had parked their car, guns in hand, while Jimmie and Zack took positions behind the trunk, their weapons also at the ready. Tony ran back to the car, diving for cover behind it, and just before the street disappeared out of sight he saw a blur out of the corner of his eye, an object which stopped at the street intersection

where they had all come in. Any sound he would have heard was drowned out with the first peals of handheld thunder.

And he thought to himself *oh shit it's a trap we've been fucking set up* and he could almost taste the charge in the air kinda like metal that left his tongue numb and dropped his stomach while clenching his balls as a quick poppoppop went off above and to his left. He turned to see Jimmie crouching behind the cover of the trunk ripping rounds out of his hi-nine. He was a machine, reloading his pistol with a new clip as soon as the last round was fired from the old one, letting the empty magazine drop to the ground ignored.

And the world went nuts as there was suddenly thunder and the car suddenly shuddered from impact and Tony screamed oh shit because he couldn't help it. He searched frantically for Zack, and his stomach dropped at the sight of his friend on the ground with blood all over him blood coming out of him his head at a funny angle like the rest of him. And Jimmie, still firing away oblivious to it all. Told himself *Jesus Christ I'm outta here* as the window died, bits raining down in a glass shower, cutting his head and neck. But all he cared about was getting out and making it out to anywhere to safety to that damned store so he started crawling when suddenly the thunder stopped. *Maybe they quit firing*, he told himself, *maybe to reload*. He got up and started running for the fence like - oh hell - he heard a sudden thunder clap far away as he felt something - whump - in his back, somewhere in his shoulder. He wasn't really sure the exact location, just that he felt a hard fast punch that winded him, a punch hotter and faster than any arm could throw. His left arm had suddenly gone limp. Some small part of his brain wanted to ponder this but was interrupted by a second blow just above his waist,

which seemed to push *through* him. And as he looked down, why, yes it had come out his front and was now running down his shirt and pants, a thought which scared him but not as much as it should have. But as he reached up to put his hand over the hole the ground came up faster. The concrete jarring him a bit and odd tasting, warm and wet like copper. The store, so far away, he had been closer than that. The lights were really bright. He hadn't even reached the fence yet. He should try to get back up and make it. Just a matter of getting up but can't get up what's wrong with none of this should have happened wished never was here as a fuzziness clouded his vision and couldn't see black pushing down into...

March 22, 1995

(Untitled)

He awoke to the sound of thunder.

A loud rumble, violence that shook the sky above him, his room, his bed. Then silence, before it came again: louder, more insistent. A multiple boom-boom-boom above him that wouldn't let him sleep.

And then, the storm had a voice.

"Yo, Spook. Wake up, man."

Tony lifted his head with a start, opening his eyes to a peculiar vertigo sensation. The world was odd, glare and off-colored dots of light. He shook his head, winced at the sudden ache in his neck, dream sloughing off the haze in his head. Something pressed hard against his side, giving his back grief. He shifted to ease the discomfort and looked around, taking in his surroundings.

He wasn't in bed.

He tried to sit up, stretch, found it difficult in the narrow space. He reached back, gingerly massaging the crimp in his neck.

*Aw Christ, he thought. That's what you get for falling asleep in a car.*

The thunder returned, urgent, machine gun pounding on the roof once again. And with it, the voice. "Yo, Spook, wake up already. We're here, man."

Tony looked over the back of the passenger seat, saw a form through the rear window: the source of the thunder. Behind the figure was something else, a heavy black outline. He opened the door, stood on legs of gelatine for an uncertain moment before

regaining control of the ground below him. He got a brief glimpse of pale red brick and faded grey wood before focusing his attention on the grinning figure at the trunk. And the car behind it.

"About damn time," the figure said. "I thought was gonna have to drive your ass to the hospital. Thought maybe you slipped into a coma or died on me."

Tony lifted his hand up. "Zack, read between the lines, man."

Just a moment of contemplation before, "Oh, good one. 'Read between the lines'." Zack mimicked Tony's gesture: middle finger the only one extended in his hand.

"Thought I'd make it easy on you." Tony saw his friend smile. "Besides," he said, lowering his hand, "nobody ever passed out from too much pot."

"I think you had more than just pot."

"Well, I know I sure as hell didn't drink that much."

"Okay. Sure." Zack came around the car and patted Tony on the shoulder. "Maybe you're just getting too old to party with me. College life slowing you down."

"Like hell, asshole," Tony said.

Zack smiled, then headed back to the trunk. Tony called out to him, "Hey, Zack." His friend stopped, turned around. "Who's car is that?"

Zack looked at the other vehicle. It was an older model black Camaro, the windows tinted to prevent anyone from seeing in. "Oh, that? That's Jimmy. Remember him? That's why I woke you up. I needed to get you up before everybody else shows up."

Tony paused. "What do you mean, 'before everybody else shows up'?" he asked,

following Zack to the back of the car.

"It was what I was telling you about earlier, man, when you were busy getting your ass blasted," Zack replied. "Or did you forget?" He gave Tony a brief inquisitive stare. "Besides, it's nothing big. Just something real quick. Thought it'd be good to have my bro' Spooky there with me," he said. He reached over, slapped Tony on the shoulder again, "Just in case."

*Just in case of what?* Tony wanted to ask as he heard a door open, and saw Jimmy get out of the Camaro. Jimmy, with his quilted flannel and baggy clothes and his hair slicked back: cool as shit. Someone from Zack and Tony's neighborhood, Jimmy was someone Tony had preferred to acknowledge in passing rather than try to carry on a conversation with. Tony had never really cared for him; Jimmy had always seemed somewhat slick, fidgety. Unstable. Tony had thought that Zack felt a similar way; in fact, Tony had never known the two to even get along. Evidently things had changed since the last time Tony was home.

Jimmy met Zack between the two cars, the two shaking hands before speaking in hushed tones. The two looked like brothers whose mother liked to dress them alike; Zack wore a heavy flannel much like Jimmy's, and he too wore his hair slick. During the conversation Jimmy shot an occasional glance over Zack's shoulder at Tony, talking the whole time. Not wanting to look at the two, Tony turned away, taking the time to get a better look at his surroundings.

They were in a sort of cul-de-sac, a small paved area enclosed on three sides by an old picket fence. Above the fence and to his sides Tony looked into holes of black

surrounded by faded two-and-three-story brick structures. Windows stared back at him, sightless glass eyes extinguished long ago; some were boarded over, a crude attempt at covering up the damage. Directly in front of him nothing rose up behind the fence, which instead seemed to separate the pavement from a small patch of land behind it. A larger hole in the fence revealed a great shock of grass which sprouted into the gap left by the wood.

Tony turned around, looked out into the street and the buildings beyond it, saw more of the same. The former ground level display windows had suffered the same fate as the smaller ones above them. The result shaped the remaining glass into large open mouths, jagged shards in front of insides gutted long ago. Together, the combination of broken windows formed faces that appeared to be laughing. Or screaming. Like in some perverted funhouse.

Tony shook his head. Maybe Zack had been right, maybe Tony had had a little too much tonight. *Or maybe, something had had a little extra added to it.* Tony frowned. The thought bothered him, the possibility that some little surprise could be slipping around in his system now. From the looks of things, now was not the time for surprises. Now was the time to be in control. To be cool.

Tony took a deep breath, scanned the area again. They were in a parking lot. *But where are we?* he wondered. *Downtown?* Nothing looked familiar to him. Maybe if he could see it again during the daytime he would recognize something.

A flash of light on the street caught his attention, and he looked down to see another car turn into the lot, this one newer, in better shape than Jimmy's Camaro. It



pulled up near the other vehicles, parking between them and the street. Tony watched over the top of Zack's car as two men got out of the new car and walked over to Zack and Jimmy. The group shook hands, and Zack gestured to Tony to come over.

Tony walked around to where the others had congregated next to Jimmy's car. One of the newcomers was busy talking to Jimmy. The other watched as Tony approached, took the time to look him over, examine him. The eyes were cool, controlled. Watching, examining. And then, shifting to Jimmy just as casual. In that brief moment, Tony felt a twinge, and knew deep down that no matter what act Zack and Jimmy may be putting on, these boys were for real.

The talk continued for a brief time longer before Jimmy piped up and said, "Hey, let's check out the trunk."

There were a few brief glances all around before one of the newcomers nodded and said, "Sure. Let's go," motioning with his head toward his car. Tony hesitated as the rest of the group started heading over. He cleared his throat before addressing the group.

"Well, if it's all cool with y'all, I'll just hang back," Tony said. "I'm not feeling too hot." He looked around, was met with varying expressions. Zack and Jimmy's eyes seemed to widen for just a moment, but the newcomers gazed at him, expressionless. Was that a good thing? Did that mean that they were cool with it? That they saw him for the threat he wasn't? Tony backed off, started heading back to his familiar post next to the roof of Zack's car.

He hadn't made it more than a few steps before he felt the familiar hand on his

shoulder, and heard the voice behind him. "Hey, man. What's up?" Tony turned to see Zack's questioning face. The eyes were a little wider than usual, a little more concerned. "Is everything cool?" Zack asked. "You thinking that we oughta leave now?" Zack's gestured with his eyes at the group behind him.

Tony hesitated a moment before answering. Was it them, or just everything that was in his system? He wasn't sure. "No, no, he said. "Nothing like that. I'm just...." He had to look for the words. "It's late. I'm tired. And I guess I am pretty fucked up." He sighed. "Maybe you're right. Maybe I am getting too old to party with your sorry ass."

Zack looked at him for a moment, and then the tension melted away to that familiar smile. He sighed. "Okay, man. You had me scared here for a second. I was afraid we were gonna have to shoot our way oughta here."

A realization hit Tony like a slap. "Oh."

Zack didn't seem to notice as he turned back and looked at the others. "No it should be cool. Everybody seems pretty cool here." He turned to walk away, stopped, turned back to Tony, serious again. "Hey, if you feel like you need to leave or anything else like that you be sure to let me know, right? And if something should happen to go down, man, I've got my AK back behind the driver's seat. Safety's off, so all you have to do is point and shoot. Got it?"

Tony looked at him dumfounded. "Zack." Tony was beginning to have to fight for the words. "What's in that trunk?"

"Why?"

"Why the firepower? The AK?"

"Oh. I brought it, just in case." Zack looked off, seemed to drift off for a moment. "It's just that this could be the beginning, man. This could get me out of that fuckin' pit we grew up in." He turned back to Tony. "You found a way out, man. You've got that college thing. I don't. This is my shot." Zack's boyish smile was gone, replaced by a stern, foreign expression.

"You heard of (\*\*\*\*\*), right?"

Tony nodded. (\*\*\*\*\*), some synthetic, designed to make the user one with God or something like that.

"Well, these boys are our connection to it. Jimmy and me, we're the first around here to get our hands on it. And word is it's hot on the coasts. So it's gotta be hot here, man. And we'll be part of it. I just wanted you here, to see me when I broke in. Even give you a piece of it, if you wanted."

Tony remained silent for a moment. "No, that's okay. You know I never touch stuff that heavy. I'd could go nuts just being near it."

"So, do you want to take off?" Zack's expression changed again. Now he looked pathetic.

He thought about it, ignored the small hazy voice in his head that sounded suspiciously like *yes, yes, yes*. "No. Go ahead. As long as I can stay here, we're cool."

"Cool." Zack reached out, grabbed Tony's hand and shook it. "You're there for me, right? Just like when we were kids." And then, he was gone, walking back to the group waiting on him.

Tony watched Zack walk off. In light of everything they'd just said, Tony was pissed. He hated it when Zack did this. Calling Tony by that damned nickname was one thing, but when Zack went so far as to exploiting Tony's "ability," that was when Tony thought about reconsidering their friendship.

It wasn't the first time Zack had done something like this. When they were younger Tony had been accomplice to several stupid childhood pranks. It had been more innocent then, annoying neighborhood gags with a limited number of suspects but never a conviction. In their teens, it had graduated up to some minor shoplifting, nothing big. Until they were caught. More than once. Zack's interest in Tony's "ability" seemed to diminish rapidly after that, almost disappear. All except for the nickname, which stuck.

That brought questions to Tony's mind. Knowing the past failures, why was Zack putting so much trust in him right now? Why so much obvious importance on his friend's ability to get "spooked" when he knew that it wasn't something he could control? That it never had been? Zack's long-term memory had obviously been clouded by what he saw as possibilities in the present, something which could be extremely dangerous for the both of them.

Something which, of course, angered Tony even more. *Sorry, pal*, he thought. *Our friendship doesn't involve me putting my ass on the line so you can make money.*

*But you owe it to him*, intruded his mind. *When your old man came home drunk to find something to beat the shit out of, who hid with you? When everybody else around you avoided you like a freak, who was there for you?* Tony clenched his eyes, gritted his teeth. He hated thinking about the past. But the memories flitted around his head,

wouldn't go away, impossible to catch and crush. And until they did, neither would his growing guilt.

Tony needed a distraction, something to keep his mind busy; thinking was upsetting him too much. Well, at least one good thing was coming out of this: he was sobering up. He looked at the street, was met by the leering faces of the buildings, deciding to keep moving his focus. Okay, maybe he wasn't that sober yet.

His gaze fell back on Zack, at the rear of the car with the others. Zack, who stood a little separate from the guys at the trunk, all the while watching them while wearing a badass attitude like it naturally fit him. At the surface, Tony found his friend's bullshit gangsta routine a bit ridiculous. Looking at him, he could still see was the mischievous neighborhood kid he'd befriended as a boy. But Tony was coming to realize that this wasn't the same kid that he had grown up with.

Tony looked over at Jimmy, who was doing all the talking right now. Jimmy, playing it so damned cool, like he was the one in control. Tony didn't know Jimmy all that well, had known him for a small-timer that was going to remain that way until he was shot or killed in some other stupid fashion. He alone should have been reason enough for Tony to stay away. But Tony was here only at Zack's insistence, at his friend's assurance that this was going to be an easy deal. *The things you do for friendship*, he thought grimly.

Tony turned away from the group, leaned back against the car door. He rubbed the back of his neck with his hand; there was still some stiffness, but it was gradually working itself out now. It was odd, but he could have sworn he felt the hairs on his neck

rise up for just a moment. And with it, a mild anxiousness, like one gets when near a big, unfamiliar dog. Then, nothing.

It was replaced by what Tony sensed as a charge in the air, coming from the direction of the others. Tony snorted. He wouldn't have been surprised if the shit in the trunk was giving off something. Yeah, he'd heard about (\*\*\*\*\*). It gave the user an incredible rush. A clean high, said to be cleaner than heroin, with the added bonus of subsequent highs being almost as good as the first. It made the user feel healthier, stronger, even at times indestructible. Unstoppable.

Just like God.

Hence, the name.

The attraction was obvious to him, but having something that potent bothered Tony, damn near to the point that he just as well would have walked away from it. That's why when he dealt he dealt small. Weed, acid sometimes. It was less harmless, to himself and others. And the deals sure as hell didn't require anyone to be strapped.

Walk away. Actually, the idea sounded better the more he thought about it. *Just walk away from this whole fucking mess while I still can walk.* He turned around, looked at Zack. His friend was no longer standing away from the group, but was now within it, leaning in close and examining whatever was in the trunk. *To hell with him,* Tony thought. *This is way more important to him than you are.*

For some reason Jimmy demanded Tony's attention. There was something not quite right about him. He looked....funny. What? Jimmy seemed to be overtly arrogant, more aggressive than he should be. Why? Was it a show for these guys, to try to prove

that he wasn't some punk? No, there was something more. Something in the eyes. What was...? *No*, Tony told himself. *Not that. Not sampling your own goods. You stupid fuck.*

Tony turned to Zack. He had to let his friend know of the mistake he'd made, the danger he was in. But Zack was busy, eyes glazed with the economic possibilities ahead. Tony felt the frustration rising. And with it, another older, familiar feeling.

And Tony found himself looking right at Jimmy, as Jimmy shot back at him what must have been his version of a reassuring smile. But there was more, a hidden "*don't fuck this up*" brimming just below the wolfish grin. Tony felt a flash of heat around his face and neck. He broke contact and looked away, fearing that Jimmy had read his mind.

Tony needed something to focus on, anything to keep his mind occupied so that he could get his cool back. He turned around, searched for an elusive focal point so that he could concentrate, regain his composure. And then, he noticed something he hadn't picked up on before. The fence, the buildings. Walls...

The realization hit him like a semi.

*It was a trap.*

And then he heard a choir in his head, a group of voices that rose with power, that told him to *run. Now.* Tony swiveled back to the group at the trunk once again. *Why are you waiting?* a part of his mind screamed. He ignored it, tried to find Zack in the crowd. Found him, lost in the trunk's alluring pull. *You said it yourself*, said his mind. *This is more important to him than you are. He wants this. He's your friend, but it's your ass.*

Fighting a growing sense of nausea, Tony turned back to the fence, took another look at it. It was a little over head height. The old weatherbeaten wood was splitting at points, the paint having peeled away long ago. Here and there were holes where some of the boards had broken away. Tony saw one gap that was almost large enough for a body to get through. Anybody going through there would come away with a few splinters, but at least his ass would be in one piece. Now if only his mind would stop screaming long enough for him to think of a way to get Zack over here.

The sound of voices jerked him back to the present. Commotion at the trunk of the car. Everyone was yelling at each other. Jimmy, Zack, the newcomers. Tony made little sense out of all the confusion at first, could only pick up bits and pieces. By the time he started putting together what was going on it was already too late. The guns were already out.

Tony dropped to the ground behind Zack's car, almost hugged the door for protection. Any sound he would have heard was drowned out with the first peals of handheld thunder.

He thought *it's a trap we've been fucking set up*. He could almost taste the charge in the air, kinda like metal that left his tongue numb and dropped his stomach while clenching his balls. A quick poppoppop went off above and to his left. He felt tiny shudders in the car as it was hit by several small objects. Then, a heavier impact, one which rocked the vehicle.

Tony opened his eyes to see a shadow come spinning around the car. It landed next to Tony, a wet form sprawled out on the ground. Still, unmoving. Near one of its



hands, a semi-automatic pistol. Tony tried to get a look at the face, was distracted by the dark stain that grew out around the body.

Tony looked at the body in dread, watching in dumb shock as it twitched, then pushed itself up off the now wet pavement. The body lifted its head up, and Tony looked at someone who should have been dead but wasn't, the chest punched open with multiple leaking holes.

But that wasn't the worst part. No, the worst was the face, a bloodstreaked mess with pulp where one eye had been, and a perpetual sneer to the face where part of a cheek was missing. The mad, roving loner of an eye locked on Tony, and he held back a cry as he saw an instant of recognition on Jimmy's face. The look on it which screamed at him, blamed him. *You did this. You caused this. You fucked this up.*

Tony pressed himself against the car, immobile in the impossibility of it all as another small series of shudders rocked the auto. Jimmy twitched again, shifted his attention to something above and beyond the vehicle. His face contorted, the savage features distorting into something incomprehensible. Then, he picked up his pistol, stood, and disappeared around the car.

The world went nuts as the thunder started again and the vehicle shuddered from impact and Tony screamed because he couldn't help it. He threw himself to the ground, crawled low to the end of the car, looking underneath it, searching frantically for Zack. His stomach dropped at the sight of his friend on the ground with blood all over him, blood coming out of his head at a funny angle like the rest of him. He couldn't see Jimmy anymore, but heard rapid gunshots on the other side of Zack's car.

A window exploded above him, raining glass shower bits down on Tony, cutting his head and neck. But he didn't care about the window 'cause all he cared about now was getting out and making it out to *anywhere*.

Suddenly, the thunder stopped.

He held his breath in the silence. *Maybe they quit firing*, he told himself, *maybe to reload*. He didn't wait to find out. He got up, ran for the fence like - oh hell. Thunder claps far away sounded like firecrackers going off as an impact slammed into his back. A hard fast punch high to the shoulder that winded him, sent him spinning to the ground with a heat growing similar to the knowledge that his left arm had suddenly gone limp. He hit the pavement hard, unable to stop his face from cracking against it. Head spinning, he tasted dirt and copper in his mouth.

He lay there, stunned and floundering in awkward numbness, his body no longer his to control. He tasted blood in his mouth and wondered *Ohmigod am I dying?* The thought was fleeting as a stronger one took over. One that commanded him to get off his ass and run, run to the fence, run to safety.

He pushed himself up with his good arm into a kneeling position. He stood on toddler's legs, wobbled as he fought to maintain his balance. Remaining hunched over he stumbled on, the knuckles on his useless arm dragging the ground. After a few steps he built up his momentum, started heading toward the hole in the fence. Suddenly, his feet slipped, sending him sprawling. He reached out, caught himself with his good hand.

His head was spinning. He couldn't think. All he wanted to do was let himself fall. Just relax for a while. But he couldn't let that happen. To stop was to die.

He looked over his shoulder, couldn't see anything beyond Zack's car. Then, movement. A form that rose beyond the vehicle as it came his way. A form that approached him stiffly, as if limping. A form that lifted up something in its hand.

The firecrackers exploded again as Tony saw holes erupt in the wood of the fence. He crouched down to avoid the strafing attack, almost fell in the process.

The firing stopped.

He pushed his legs out from under him and ran, ran those last few steps to the fence as quickly as he could, didn't bother slowing down as he reached the hole, hitting it at full speed while ducking down and making himself as small as possible, feeling the burn across his back as splinters ripped away part of his shirt while leaving segments of themselves in his back, but he didn't care as the darkness swallowed him and knew he'd finally made it.

He tried to keep running, but the ground on the other side of the fence made it impossible. Tony stumbled over its rough and uneven surface, tripping several times as the ground seemed to reach up and grab him. Unable to see where he was going, Tony took a step that suddenly wasn't there and felt himself fall, landing hard facefirst. The impact jarred him, sent waves of fire spreading across his shoulder and chest, sapping what little strength he had left. He lay where he had collapsed, wondered why he had fallen. He reached around with his right hand, felt hard rough dirt that sloped up gently at his side.

*A hole*, he realized.

But was he safe here? It didn't really matter anymore, he was too drained to

move. He listened for sound, anything to indicate whether he was being followed. He waited, breathing heavily in the night air, feeling sweat fall into his face, ignoring the burning as it went into his eyes. He fought to hear over the blood rushing in his head.

Then, a rustling, the sound of movement which sank his heart and clenched his stomach in fear. He pressed himself against the earth, tried to make himself invisible where he lay in the darkness. He hoped that whoever was out there didn't accidentally find his hiding place, didn't end up down there with him.

The rustling continued, whether it got closer or farther he couldn't tell. He was too busy fighting the tears of frustration that threatened.

Then, silence. Another sound started, rising and falling in the distance, counterpointing with the rustling. He couldn't make out what it was at first, the source of that new sound. When he did the tears flowed freely down his face. And he didn't care as he laughed at the beauty of that rising, falling wail.

Laughing, crying, exhausted, he wondered how long it would be before the police found him back here.

April 28, 1996

## Untitled Work

*In the beginning, it had sounded like a good idea: a story was about a shy, non-aggressive male who, during a near-death experience, is forced to confront his own personal demons (the story's original title was "Demons"). The incident alters his life significantly, but he isn't aware of all the implications until after he experiences another violent confrontation.*

*Like I said, it sounded like a good idea.*

*That is, until everyone who read it gave a completely different interpretation of what happened in the story.*

*And so, with that in mind I rewrote the piece, trying to clarify some problem areas. What follows is the current version of the work. It still has its flaws, and may offer some confusion to the reader. It's one I'll have to come back to in the future, and I will - I still really like the idea behind it. I think for now, though, it's a piece that has even me stumped.*

(Untitled)

The slap shocked him. Doug's heart seized as he felt the hand make contact with his shoulder. Hard, fast. Painful. He jumped, spilled some of his beer on himself. He turned, eyes wide, to look into the leering grin of his attacker.

"How ya feeling?" Jamie asked, loud over the surrounding noise. Jamie's right hand dropped from Doug's shoulder. In his other hand was a large plastic dixie cup, half filled with beer. Jamie rocked back and forth slowly, keeping awkward time with the bass beats that thumped throughout the room. There were wet spots on his sweatshirt, as if he'd missed his mouth on more than one occasion.

Doug smiled as politely as he could. "Great, just great." He rolled his shoulder, tried to work the ache out. One not from Jamie's attack, but from an older, deeper wound that had been reawakened.

Jamie noticed Doug's efforts. "Oh shit, man. Sorry, I forgot." He gave Doug a guilty dog look, alcohol exaggerated response. It was a sincere expression; Jamie was one of the friendliest guys Doug knew, easy to get along with. It was just that Jamie wasn't quite aware of how strong he really was, an attribute that came with having the genetic makeup of a farmboy, something he tended to forget about whenever he got drunk.

"Don't worry about it. I'm okay," Doug said.

Jamie instantly switched modes; right back to his old self again. "Hey, is this a great party, or what?"

"Yeah. "

"What?"

Leaning in closer. Louder. "I said yeah. Great. "

"You drinking?"

Doug nodded, held up his now almost empty cup. Too much, he realized. Any more and he'd be floating home.

"I'm really glad you could come." Jamie slugged the last of his beer, stared at the empty cup for a moment, as if wondering where all the alcohol had gone. "I'm out. I'm going back to the keg for another. I'll be back." Jamie made his way through the crowd, bumped into no less than four people before he stopped and turned around, came back to Doug.

"Hey, guess who's here."

"Who?" Doug's mind was in no condition to be playing guessing games.

"Cindy. "

"No shit." Faked nonchalance.

"Yeah. You ought to go talk to her."

"Where is she?"

"I just saw her. I think she's over there," he said, pointing across the room, "sitting on the couch. Go talk to her." Jamie gave his familiar grin before disappearing back into the crowd, bumping his way through once again.

Doug stood there, staring at the spot where his friend had just been. Go talk to her. Yeah, right. He hadn't spoken to her since - when? He wasn't sure. Even now,

he had no idea of what he would say. Too much had happened. It wasn't the same anymore.

A girl bounced drunkenly off Doug, apologized sheepishly before returning attention back to her friends; group odyssey into alcoholic bliss.

The congestion in the room was getting to be a bit much for Doug. This party was simply getting too big. The people who lived here could expect a visit from the police before too long. And he didn't care to be around when that happened; Doug was short of legal drinking age by at least a year.

Doug weaved through the mass of people, having given up on thoughts of talking to Cindy. He relaxed a bit after walking into the kitchen. There were only a few people here, maybe eight tops, compared to the multitudes all packed in the living room. He found support against a nearby wall, leaned his head back, closing his eyes, riding the alcohol wave. Just take a moment to chill out before taking off.

*Night. Crossing under neon patches of streetlamp.*

"Hey, you." A voice, familiar.

Doug opened his eyes to see an attractive blonde standing before him.

"Fine, just walk by me without saying hi." Her smile was tight, awkward.

"Sorry. "

Shit. It was her.

*"That was bad."*

*"What? You've gotta be crazy," he said. "That was a great movie."*

*"It was horrible. The acting was worse than bad, and the plot was just an excuse*



*for putting in lots of blood and guts."*

*"Don't forget the sex."*

*"Oh yes, sex. How many times did we see people doing it in an hour and a half?"*

*"What's your point?" he asked. "That's exactly why it's so great."*

*She shook her head, muttered something under her breath.*

*"Excuse me?"*

*"I said, 'men.'"*

*"Oh, I see," he said, exaggerating his voice. "Lumping me in with all the rest.*

*It's that sex and violence thing, isn't it?"*

*"Well, what do you expect? All you men are into that sort of thing."*

*He sighed: false disappointment. "Gee, and I had expected so much more out of you. What can I possibly do to prove to you that I have indeed evolved beyond than my fellow cavemen?"*

*She pursed her mouth. "Let me think about it for a while. I'm sure I'll come up with something."*

*"How are you doing?" More serious.*

*"Okay." A lie. He felt anything but, instead had the urge to leave. Now.*

*"You want to talk about it?"*

*"About what?"*

*"What?" she asked.*

*"Huh?" He'd been drifting.*

*"You keep looking at me as if you want to say something. What is it?"*

*Say it. Say it.*

*"Oh, nothing. It's just that...I think I see something on your face there."*

*She stopped. "What is it?"*

*"Lemme see." He furrowed his brow, pretended to examine her face critically in the poor light. Tried to keep control of the butterflies pulling stunt maneuvers in his gut. A crazy thought entered his head, an incredible urge to...*

*"Oh, it's nothing. Sorry."*

*"Uh-huh."*

*Damn.*

He couldn't look at her, instead focused on the cup in his hand. Concentrated on it, tried to lose himself in the intricacies of its clear plastic. He waited, expected her to say something. Dreading what she would say. Nothing happened.

Her expression, her eyes too intense. He had to break off contact again, it hurt too much. He pretended to study the cup again as his mind raged. Talk to her. Make her understand what had happened. No, too much had happened. Too much permanent damage.

*Looking at his watch: "Hey, that movie lasted longer than I thought. We'd better hurry back to your place. Probably should have you home by a decent hour."*

*"Okay." She said something else, but he was too preoccupied to hear.*

*They came to an open wooded area off the sidewalk: shortcut to her place. "Hey, let's cut across here," he said. "Kinda dark, isn't it?"*

*He scanned the darkness, saw no immediate threat. "It'll be okay." Too busy*

*mentally kicking himself to suspect otherwise.*

*Big mistake.*

Backed into a corner, feeling obligated to say something, he responded with the only thing he could think of.

"Um, I was just heading out with a group of people. Actually, I better go check and see where they are." He started moving back toward the living room.

As she watched him move, Doug noticed a brief shift in her expression, like a small shock, before she regained her former demeanor. But it was flawed, with a slightly wounded look, lines digging deeper around her eyes and mouth. "Okay," she said.

"I'll talk to you about it later, okay?" he said, almost back into the crowd.

Doug barely saw her nod slightly before he lost himself in the mass of people. He headed for the main entrance, yelling silently at himself. Stupid fucking idiot. What the hell was wrong with him? Why didn't he talk to her?

Maybe later, he told himself, after he'd straightened everything out. When he could start to explain things. But how does one explain what one can't describe?

He moved through the congestion, made his way out the front door. He looked around for Jamie, saw no sign of him in the crowded living room. Outside only provided more of the same, huddled masses drinking, smoking, and talking. Doug stood on the porch, faced with the obstacle of making it around the people who had congregated there, just as loud and obnoxious as everyone inside. Great. Just great. The cops were sure to come now.

Doug maneuvered through the packs of people on the porch. He was moving past

a large group on the front lawn when something large bumped into him: six-plus feet of drunk aggression.

*Young punk, predator in training. Nameless, faceless in the dark. Arrogant, high on the rush of what he was doing. Waving the weapon in his hand like a manic symphony conductor. Voice cracking as he barked commands at the two of them.*

The guy was big, even bigger than Jamie by a good twenty to thirty pounds. Which meant Doug didn't stand a chance. The guy's size wasn't just genetics. A t-shirt stretched tight around his massive chest and shoulders, short sleeves ending in heavily veined, iron-conditioned arms.

Oh shit, Doug thought. A 'roid freak. He just pissed off a neanderthal. He looked at the guy, saw dumb aggression and alcohol doing all the thinking. Doug apologized weakly, holding his hands up open palmed in a non-aggressive manner, and tried to move on. He hadn't made it two steps before a large hand came down and spun him around. Doug's stomach dropped. Red-faced pissed, the guy spat at Doug some vocal mud about motherfuckers.

Doug searched for help, for anyone in the rapidly growing crowd to stop what was quickly getting out of hand. No one stepped between them, the group seeming more intent on seeing bloodshed. A girl appeared to the Neanderthal's side, pleading some high pitched gibberish he clearly wasn't hearing. Wrong frequency.

*Doug glanced at Cindy next to him, silent. Could see the whites of her eyes in the shadows. He turned to the kid, thin teenage silhouette. Burned with the urge to beat a lesson into him.*

*Only one little thing held him back.*

Weighing his options, Doug saw only one logical choice. Simply backing down wasn't going to be enough here. He was going to have to get the hell out if he wanted to be able to walk away.

*A flash and a bang.*

The first punch came around amazingly fast, striking Doug across the face and sending shockwaves throughout his frame.

*Heat spreading outward like wildfire. Brain registered shock, then pain, sending the world haywire.*

He staggered back senseless, brain too slow to process as another blow slammed him above the left eye. He wobbled weakly, stumbled a few steps before the ground disappeared out from under him. He grasped weakly at empty air as earth rushed up to meet him.

*Thump. On his back, staring upward stupidly, telling himself that he had to get up, limbs not responding.*

He tasted dirt, blood. A hammer came up, slammed into his side. A sharp pain shot through his chest as he felt something inside snap, give under the force. He wheezed, tried to breathe. Couldn't.

*Fire clenched his insides, made it so hard to breathe. He felt the liquid sound in his chest, couldn't hear it over the screaming.*

Forced onto his back, Doug felt a pressing weight on top of him. He tried to resist with newborn's arms as tree trunks pushed them aside and pummeled his head.

Beyond the rush of blood and pounding of boulders against his skull, he heard something odd. Voices. Almost like chanting.

*A voice, from somewhere close, yet far away. Near him, above him. High, fragile. Babbling about holding on and going away. Pressure on his chest, a hand. Frantic contact becoming fainter.*

*Screams pushing away. Into the distance.*

Lost focus, couldn't see anything.

Felt a suffocating weight pressing down. Couldn't breathe. Aware of black from behind, pushing forward. Closing around him, pulling him down.

*Air shallow. Wet. Numbness closing in like the blackness circling his vision.*

No, not again.

Gone.

*A sudden pulling, as if going everywhere at once, and yet nowhere. No pain. Just falling toward that singular little dot of white light. Distant. Pure. Fading.*

*Black.*

Riding on turbulent black waves, back and forth, forced him into to the ground. He floated in the darkness.

*Alone. No. A presence: others. Longtime companions in voice, mind. Friendships of pain rekindled.*

Alone with the mad chanting around him.

*Him powerless, small weak. Worthless. A nobody. Nothing. No way to strike back.*

"...fuckin' pussy..."

*Cowering under their weight. Crushed by the miserable knowledge. Even dying  
he can't*

"...fight..."

*A new voice. Small. Gaining strength.*

*No more.*

He shifted. A small space. A beginning.

*Suffocation push driving him insane push again push out out. Just enough room  
for a desperate strike out anywhere. Contact.*

Movement above him. A slight shift, imbalance. Another chance. Push. Air.  
Sweet rush in his lungs. Keep going.

*Strikes stronger, more focused with each blow. Do more damage. The thing  
inside growing, fueled him. Primal. Pushing him. He won't be stopped. Losing focus,  
becoming something else. Stronger, still. Uncontrollable. Fury, all consuming. Pure.*

Restriction weakened, movement returning. Freedom. Lovely sweet feeling. So  
good.

But it's not enough.

*He the attacker. Ripping, tearing, battering. Focused on this one act of release.  
To silence the pain, the hurt. Forever. Reaching outward.*

*Upward.*

The world below him once again. Almost free. Except for one. Single.  
Obstacle.

*Rising. Clawing. Tearing. Climbing, destroying all the way. Reaching. Up.*

A voice, distant, sounded like

*Screaming, fists clenched into vise grips. Blinded by white: light. Jumping forward, ripping sensation in forearms. Swinging freely. Weight coming against him, pushing him back.*

Pressure again on top of him again. Falling, landing on knees.

*Fighting harder. Not again. Not there.*

This resistance weaker. Easier to get rid of it.

*Pinprick in his shoulder. Warm numbness spreading out.* Total freedom.

Circling, spinning, taking it in. Random steps leading to anywhere.

*Softness drifted up, carried him. Light softened, became fuzzy. Black velvet washing over him.*

Tired. Needing to rest, for just a while. There, something below him. Soft enough. It will do.

*Warm softness in his hand. Gentle pressure. Reassuring. Let the gentle wave take him away.*

\* \* \*

Black sky and gnarled wooden fingers when he opened his eyes. Aware of cold hardness at his back. The familiarity hit him like a flashback, enveloping him like an old nightmare. Gripped his chest, punched the breath out of him. He gasped, desperate for air, sucked it in. Waiting for the pain to cut him off. Felt it, there in his chest, but faint, as he continued taking in oxygen. Replaced by a sharp but different type of flame that



told him he was taking in too much for his damaged ribs. A violent coughing spasm racked his body, brought tears to his eyes.

After the fit stopped he lay there a while, breathing slowly, as deeply as his wounds allowed, ignoring the pain, revelling in the fact that he still could breathe. He rolled over stiffly, moved his tongue over swollen lips, tasted dried blood. He noticed a nearby tree, dragged himself awkwardly over to where he leaned against it.

His ribs and head ached, and he felt a growing tightness in his face and hands. It wasn't as bad as he would have expected; the alcohol was doing its job in diminishing some of the discomfort. But there was something more. Alcohol wouldn't explain his nervous energy, his sudden urge to run around, to climb trees. To bench press cars. He was drunk, but not that drunk.

He looked around, tried to get his bearings. Commotion pulled his attention to a nearby building. A multitude of bodies gathered in front of a porch. The house he'd been at tonight. But it seemed so far away, so much distance between it and Doug.

His mind tried to process the information.

Doug looked through swelling eyes at the group across the lawn, a tight circle standing around something - no, somebody - lying on the ground. Unmoving. Looking like an oversized rag doll, thrown about carelessly like an unwanted abandoned toy.

A smaller group stood off to the side of the larger one, this one a group of women, girls, freshmen, whatever. One of the girls was crying hysterically while her two friends tried to console her. What the hell happened?

Individuals cast uneasy glances in his direction. A silhouette - Jamie - moved

toward him; stiffly, awkwardly, as if walking was an effort. His sweatshirt fit him oddly, stretched out and even ripped in a few spots. One of his eyes appeared to be puffing up, the skin under it a shiny red. He stopped alongside Doug's feet, remained standing.

Jesus, he looked ill.

"What happened?" Doug croaked. "Who's that guy?" He nodded in the direction of the group.

"You don't remember?"

"No." Doug felt the alcohol caress his brain, try to carry his thoughts elsewhere. "What?"

Jamie seemed to drift off for a moment, as if in deep thought, before speaking. "I'm not sure of all that happened, 'cause I was inside when it started. I heard yelling out here, and when I came out I saw you and him....and everybody else. It was crazy." He looked at Doug uneasily. "The guy's pretty messed up. We had to call an ambulance."

Doug looked at his friend incredulously, his newfound energy disappearing. An ambulance? What-? How-? Jamie wasn't making any sense. Doug tried to search through the alcohol fog for any memory of the recent past, pulled out fragments. He remembered coming to the party, talking to Cindy, bumping into the Neanderthal on his way out, getting hit, blacking out. After that...

"Hey." Jamie's voice brought Doug back from his reverie. "The ambulance is probably coming by now. Cops are, too, I think. Somebody's going to have to try to explain this mess to them." Jamie's attention seemed transfixed elsewhere. Doug

followed the glance down his body, to the balled up fists hanging loosely at his sides. Doug lifted them up, couldn't make out much in the dim light.

He made eye contact with Jamie. Something weird passed over his friend's face, an emotion Doug had never seen in him before. A deer caught in the headlights of an approaching vehicle, not knowing whether to run or remain paralyzed.

Jamie broke the heavy silence. "Um, well, I'd better go. Okay?"

Doug nodded weakly and watched his friend head back to the circle. What had he seen? It was almost like he'd been scared by something.

Doug lifted his hands back up for further inspection. They were clenched tightly, to the point that it should have been painful. Except for the fact that he couldn't feel anything in them. No pain, just a heavy numbness, like he was carrying weights on the ends of his arms.

He tried to open his hands, but they didn't want to respond, fingers gripped in on themselves like a trap. Realizing the futility of trying both at once, he focused his attention on his right hand. Eventually, the muscles responded, joints flexing slowly, fingers opening like bloody petals. And with it - pain - that cut through the numbness in his brain. He hissed at the sudden sensation, stopped to look for its source.

The hand was misshapen, swollen digits making it look more like paw than a hand. Doug turned the hand in the dim light, noticed little half moons dug into the flesh of his palm; dark liquid welled up from them. He turned the hand over. Saw blood and dark shadows covering the skin. Bruises? The back of the hand seemed odd, almost lumpy.

"Doug."

Cindy. She'd been crying. Her look of weariness was familiar; the last time Doug had seen it was while he was in a hospital bed.

"You almost killed someone." Her words sounded weak, foreign. "That guy you fought, you beat the hell out of him. He's over there, unconscious. I don't know what happened or how it all started, I just heard the screaming. By the time I got out here some guys were trying to pull you off him. He wasn't even moving anymore. Then you turned and started going after them." Her eyes gleamed wetly. "It was like you were...someone else."

His hands, the blood on them confirmed it. He slumped back against the tree.

"I don't know. I can't remember anything." He shook his head. "Just... darkness. That darkness, that black. And being alone. And scared." He closed his eyes, felt little tremors shake his through his body. He gritted his teeth, fought the threatening tempest. Nothing to do but sit there and wait the storm out.

He felt a hand touch his arm. Something inside him gave. Shame burned at his loss of control.

Arms wrapped around him, held him tight. He wanted to return the gesture, but didn't. Wept. Ashamed of his hands.

## Awakening

*Here's a screenplay for a project that I worked on last semester in one of my TCOM production classes. It's something that, as well as coming up with the story, I produced and directed. The class assignment was to make a short video clip (essentially a mini-movie) that told the tale of an individual who went crazy in three minutes. With such a short time limit, I opted to use a montage of imagery to convey the story, avoiding the use of dialogue.*

*The original screenplay was typed up by one of the other members of my group. I've rewritten it here, including only the scenes that appeared in the final copy of the project (some were omitted for time and story clarity).*

## AWAKENING

### SCENE

#### 1. INT. BEDROOM - EARLY MORNING

Dawn: dim light seeps into a small bedroom. The room is decorated in a basic fashion: bed, desk, dresser with mirror, closet, etc. In one of the corners is a bed; a form sleeps soundly under the covers. It is a young MAN, in his early twenties. Suddenly, a noise: the steady annoying beep-beep-beep of an alarm. Eyes shoot open as the MAN reaches over to the nightstand and turns off the alarm clock. He throws off the covers, launches himself up into a sitting position. Once there, he slows, rocks unsteadily on the bed. Brings his hands up to his face.

#### 2. EXT. PARK - DAY

The MAN stands near a tree in a small city park. He wears a heavy winter coat: cold weather. He holds a 35 mm SLR camera. He is photographing some of the local scenery: leafless trees, old buildings, etc. While in the process of taking a photo, something grabs his attention. He lowers the camera, watches as a couple walks by on a nearby sidewalk: a BOY and GIRL. While in their mid-teens, there is nothing abnormal about the couple. And yet the MAN continues to stare at them as they pass by him.

#### 3. INT. BEDROOM - NIGHT

The MAN is back in his room, sitting at his desk. In his hands is a PHOTO. He examines it, staring at some perplexing detail. Becoming frustrated, he tosses the photo aside. He notices the TOOLBOX sitting on the file cabinet next to the desk. Stares at it.

#### 4. INT. LIMBO - UNKNOWN

The MAN kneels, isolated in the middle of a black unknown. Slumped over, he rocks slowly under the harsh glare of a single unknown spotlight. Then - he reaches out to his sides: Jesus Christ pose. Touches nothing.

(CONTINUED)

5. INT. BEDROOM - NIGHT

The MAN walks up to the dresser, exhausted, puts his hands on it. He pauses, brings his hands up for closer examination. In the palms of his hands he sees small bloody holes. He turns the hands over in disbelief, sees the same thing on the backs of the hands. He looks up at the mirror. Disbelief becomes horror as the man watches small trails of blood leak down his forehead.

6. EXT. FIELD - DAY

The MAN stands in the middle of an open field, half naked and trembling. Around him, no plants, no animals. No life. The ground is covered by a thin layer of snow. In the distance are the bare limbs of barren trees. He turns, sees nothing but the barren trees surrounding him on all sides. He stops, wavers. Falls.

7. INT. LIMBO - UNKNOWN

The MAN lands hard on his hands and knees. Once again, he is under the harsh glare of the single spotlight. He pushes himself up, rocks back and forth. Motion to his side grabs his attention. He turns, watches as an anonymous FIGURE approaches him out of the darkness.

8. INT. BEDROOM - NIGHT

The MAN sits on his bed, undressed, as if having just woken up. Ripped from sleep by a nightmare. Fists clenched over his face. He screams.

9. INT. BEDROOM - NIGHT

The MAN lies on his bed, fully dressed in shirt and jeans. His head is wrapped in gauze. He stares at the ceiling. Turns his attention to the TOOLBOX sitting next to the desk. Absentmindedly, he brings a hand up and scratches his shoulder. The hand is bandaged.

(CONTINUED)

10. INT. HALLWAY - NIGHT

The MAN closes the door to his room. He is dressed in a heavy coat with a watch cap over his head. He locks the door with a gloved hand. In the other gloved hand he carries the TOOLBOX. He removes his key from the lock and leaves.

11. EXT. STREET - NIGHT

The MAN walks under streetlights: spotlights.

12. EXT. HOUSE - NIGHT

The MAN reaches a house, walks up to the front door, knocks. The door opens...

13. INT. HOUSE - NIGHT

The MAN sits down on a couch in the living room. The coat and cap have been removed, and the man still wears the bandages on his head. He relaxes, turns his attention to the television, which shows only static. He wipes absentmindedly at something on his face, smearing blood on his cheek. He looks at the still bandaged hand in disgust, at the blood all over it, at the nails he's holding in it. He throws the nails down on the table in front of him. They land next to a bloody hammer. And the open TOOLBOX.

The MAN, shirt torn, spotted with blood, notices something else. Looks to the BOY lying on the ground, hands tied and nailed to the wooden legs of the table. Eyes closed, head and hair wet with blood. The MAN watches the unmoving body. Begins to chuckle. Sits back on the couch. Laughs. Uncontrollably.

14. INT. BEDROOM - NIGHT

The desk. Photographs spread sporadically on its surface: blurry, distorted images of tree, sky. In the middle of the chaos a single focused PHOTO. In it, the BOY, looking back at the camera. Blood trailing down his forehead.